



FALL 2010

THE PROMISE

Washington, D.C. Trip Presents Monuments, Cherry Blossoms, and One Daunting Challenge

For the eleven 7th- and 8th-graders who represented Urban Promise Academy in Washington, D.C. this spring, the application process was so rigorous that it resembled applying for college. Not only did students need to carry at least a 3.0 grade-point average and write an essay, they also had to secure recommendations from their teachers and go through an interview.

“It was their first experience formally interviewing for something,” says UPA Assistant Principal and trip organizer Dennis Guikema, “and they were awesome. They came very prepared and I found out things I would have never expected. 7th-grader Maria, for example, recited from memory the entire preamble to the Constitution.”

The trip itself was monumental for the kids – and their families. “All the families took a leap of faith,” says Guikema. “This was the first time they’d been separated from their kids for that long and that distance.”

They were also incredibly excited for them, and lived vicariously through the students. “In D.C.,” recalls 8th-grader Alejandra, “my mom called me every five minutes to say, ‘Send me some pictures, I want to see what you’re doing!’”

What they did, thanks to the well-organized Close Up program, was a what’s-what of Washington, D.C.: Visits to the Arlington Cemetery, Vietnam Memorial, Holocaust Museum, Lincoln Memorial, the seasonal cherry blossoms, and more.



“Maybe I wasn’t alive while they fought,” says Alejandra of the soldiers buried in Arlington Cemetery, “but it felt like you lived through their stories and you lived through what they lived through.”

While these experiences made the students feel at home in the nation’s capital, they soon encountered a situation the typical tourist would never face.

Taking part in a mock Congress session, UPA’s exercise involved reviewing the Dream Act and deciding whether or not to amend it. “After we said we believed all immigrants who want to go to college should have the right to gain residence or citizenship,” says Alejandra, “a student from another school stood up and said that all immigrants should go back to their country because

they’re stealing our jobs.”

“When we heard ‘Go back to your country’ at the mock Congress,” says 7th-grader Jennifer, “we were so emotional about that. One of us was crying.” After briefly venting their frustrations back in the hotel room -- “Some kids were hitting the pillows,” recalls Ivonne, “saying, ‘We deserve respect!’” – the kids calmly planned a measured, mature response.

“We started talking amongst each other about how it was not really fair, how they don’t know us or where we come from,” says Alejandra. “We wondered what we should do, and how we should face it.”

What ensued, says Guikema, “was really powerful. That conversation was so intense,” he recalls. “It was one of the most memorable experiences of

my UPA history so far.”

“We talked as a group and told each other how we felt,” says 7th-grader Maria. “We expressed our feelings to each other.”

“We decided we wanted to talk to the coordinator of the program and let them know our experiences,” says Alejandra. “We also wrote letters to Senator John Kerry and we went to his office where we met with his senior aide. We told him that inside and outside the community these things just happen, and we don’t want these things to repeatedly happen.”

“In an unsafe situation, they didn’t act inappropriately in the moment,” Guikema says. “They came together as a group, calling in support and figuring out what to do next.”

“In all my years of working in schools,” says Guikema, “I’ve never seen students have the opportunity to speak to power so directly.”

To drive this point home, Guikema shifts his attention from the Promise reporter to address the D.C. students directly. “You had a chance to present letters to a senior-ranking senator on a really timely policy issue. A group of kids from an Oakland school who historically are marginalized in the political process, you went into the

belly of the beast and made your voices heard. I’m so proud of you guys.”

In the heat of the moment, says Guikema, “I was really questioning whether we could do this trip again. But then I realized that the way they handled it just made them that much stronger.”

“You *should* go again,” asserts Alejandra. “And next year when you select the students, you should tell

them this might happen.”

“You can help me interview them if you want!” replies Guikema. “You can explain the right way to handle a challenge like that.”

“[This experience] helped me believe that what I want to do is possible,” reflects Claudia. “[It taught us] how to be leaders, how we can be responsible and represent our school and how other kids can look up to us.”

“I’m going to miss being an UPA Warrior,” says Alejandra, “but you kind of carry that around wherever you go. The experiences you have [at UPA and in places like D.C.], no one can take that away from you and you remember them forever. We learn things you don’t see on TV or in newspapers. When younger kids ask you about D.C., you have stories to share. You have the honor to say, ‘I went there and stood in that spot.’”

SUPPORT UPA!

The fundraising effort for our Washington, D.C. trip was a marathon – literally. Nine UPA staff members ran either the half or full Oakland marathon, along with many more supporters from the community to help raise the money to send our kids east. Our families, too, contributed whatever they could. “We experienced tremendous support from our teachers and school and community,” says Guikema. “The entire UPA community really invested in our kids to make this possible.”



It is not too early to start thinking about next spring’s trip!
You can donate to the cause at
www.urbanpromiseacademy.org/donate
or by check to “OSF/UPA,” P.O. Box 20238, Oakland CA 94620.
Thank you for supporting our students’ horizon-expanding journeys!

URBAN PROMISE ACADEMY



Mark Triplett, Principal
mark.triplett@ousd.k12.ca.us
Phone: 510-879-1640



Urban Promise Academy
is a member of the OSF network

3031 E 18th St., Oakland, CA 94601 • www.urbanpromiseacademy.org